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ABSTRACT

Designed to guide community college administrators in developing an effective state government relations program, this paper reviews recent literature, documents, and journal articles that: (1) present calls for action and provide a rationale for developing a legislative relations program; (2) provide guidelines and checklists outlining the steps and/or stages necessary to develop an effective approach to legislative relations; and (3) offer blueprints or models of specific government relations programs for other community colleges to implement or adapt to their needs. Calls for action underscore the small number of players that shape community college policy on a state level, the involvement of agency heads and members of the governor's staff in policy formation, and the failure of community college representatives to see themselves as advocates. Among the first steps advocated for legislative relations programs are the development of a series of information profiles spelling out the school's training partnerships with employers, the course of federal dollars through the campus and to students, alumni placement, and lawmakers and their staff. Another strategy is using community college trustees as advocates. Two of the best sources of advice on developing a legislative relations program are a study identifying strategies for legislative advocacy at Dallas County Community College (DCCC) in Texas and a case study of the legislative relations program at Miami-Dade Community College (MDCC) in Florida. (JMC)

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A CAPITOL IDEA!

EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY COLLEGE RELATIONS WITH STATE GOVERNMENT:

A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

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Abstract

The article reviews the literature available to guide community college administrators in developing an effective state government relations program to help limit the devastation of recurring economic slumps and shape the increasing amount of state legislation nationwide, which swelled by almost 300 percent in one five-year period (Grady, 1985). Five sources are highlighted to provide a framework and step-by-step guide for developing a strong government relations program.

A front-page story in the June 26, 1991, edition of the Chronicle of Higher Education headlined the stark fact that 30 states cut higher education budgets by an average of 3.9 percent in fiscal year 1990-91 (Cage). This dismal state of affairs brings home the need for community colleges to act on a decade of calls by community college commentators for campus leaders to develop systematic plans for extensive legislative liaison (Caswell, 1988; Garland, 1988; Grady, 1985; Hines, 1981; Mensel, 1989-90). The importance of forging strong links between community colleges and the state capitol stems from changing economic patterns, which are reflected in the fact that Community colleges have increasingly turned to state legislatures for improved funding in recent years (Cohen, 1989). State aid to community colleges rose from 29 percent in 1959 to 47 percent in 1986. Unfortunately, the degree of success enjoyed by individual institutions or even by entire community college systems across the country in securing solid, wisely distributed financial backing from their state legislatures and in securing a healthy mix of funding sources has varied widely. Today, some institutions depend on state appropriations for as much as 80 percent of their revenue, while others receive less than a third of their financing from the state legislature (Cohen, 1989). In some cases, community colleges have failed so resoundingly to achieve solid state backing that they have been shut down; others have been swallowed by a neighboring college or university. A few, however, have

rallied brilliantly in adversity to gain the solid financial commitment from the State necessary to build strong programs.

How did they do it? Answering this question is significant to every community college in today's climate of economic struggle and uncertainty. Furthermore, current economic wisdom warns that a recurrent pattern is emerging in which "pockets" of economic depression will form randomly in various regions of the U.S., much as "little" wars are expected to explode periodically around the world. If this forecast is correct, then community colleges can expect to need a broad network of financial support to survive recurring, unpredictable economic slumps.

The lynchpin of this network will likely be the state legislature. For more than a decade, state legislatures have been reshaping community college systems, with or without the input of the colleges themselves. According to one report, "State legislation affecting community colleges increased by 297 percent from 1977 through 1982," (Grady, 1985), a rise of almost 300 percent in only five years. This trend clearly indicates that community college leaders need to be working out careful plans to minimize the impact of economic slumps and to focus the vision underlying state legislation. But what guidance is available to administrators in developing first-rate liaison with state government? An ERIC search, plus a look through the Education Index for the years 1987 through May, 1991, reveals articles on community college legislative relations that fall into three broad categories:

1) Calls for action that provide a rationale for developing a legislative relations program

2) Guidelines and checklists outlining the steps and/or stages necessary to develop an effective approach to legislative relations

3) Blueprints, or models, of specific government relations programs for other community college leaders to implement or adapt to their needs

Among the best of the calls for action is a 1988 article by Peter H. Garland, Executive Assistant to the Pennsylvania Commissioner for Higher Education, and S.V. Martorana, a Professor Emeritus of Education at the University of Pennsylvania who has been examining state laws affecting junior colleges and publishing his findings since 1950. The 1988 article on which Garland and Martorana collaborated presents research findings on the theoretical underpinnings of policymaking. The authors examined the political culture and subsystems in six (unnamed) states found to be representative of national patterns and drew a number of conclusions significant to community college leaders:

1) Only a handful (five or six) individuals typically control the process of policy making for community college in an entire state. In short, community college leaders can easily identify the key players they will need to work with in shaping constructive community college policy.

2) Legislators are not the only state officials making a direct impact on community college policy. State agency heads and members of the governor's staff frequently play significant roles as well. Ensuring that all the key players know and understand issues affecting the community college should be an unceasing priority, the authors maintain.

3) Many representatives of the community college system do not accurately perceive their pivotal role as advocates, a weakness that strikes at the heart of the effort to build effective legislative relations.

As a whole, Garland and Martorana found that community college leaders tended to limit their role to reactive, rather than proactive, participation. This serious defect of vision must be corrected before an effective program of legislative advocacy can be forged by any institution.

The Garland and Martorana study clearly supports the systematic development of community college legislative advocacy: The payoff can be high in "stature and influence" and "important benefits" for community colleges willing to exercise "persistent and informed involvement" (1988). Moreover, the empirical, research-based nature of the information in this article makes it an excellent starting point for community college leaders who want to improve the level of support and commitment to their institution by state government.

Assuming the commitment has been made to develop a sound legislative advocacy program, though, what plan of action should community college leaders take? Among the many articles offering tip lists and guidelines, two stand out. One is a brief, two-part article by Frank Mensel, who for many years has directed federal relations in a dual capacity for the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges and the Association of Community College Trustees. Mensel recommends building a series of information profiles as the first step in the process of developing effective legislative relations programs (1989-90). These include:

1) A data profile spelling out the school's "training partnerships with employers"

2) A data profile charting the course of federal dollars through the campus and to students

3) A profile of alumni placement

4) Profiles of lawmakers and their staff members.

In just three pages, Mensel offers fresh insights and graphic illustrations of the value of building a clear, concise information base before attempting to persuade state officials to adopt the community college's vision of the future for this facet of higher education.

Another useful perspective is provided by Daniel Grady, former Chairman of ACCT, who argues in favor of using community college trustees as advocates (1985). Grady begins by listing the basic steps in organizing an effective lobbying effort. The list he provides has the advantage of being concise, but it sacrifices specificity, offering no illustrations of the activities named. This could be a drawback for the novice planner. Grady also sets out recommendations for forming a lobbying team, this time noting specific questions that must be answered and defining the roles that must be performed by each team member. One activity he recommends is to involve legislators in local campus activities, thus providing visibility and public access for the lawmaker and, at the same time, informing him/her directly about the mission and needs of the college. Another, more controversial, suggestion from Grady is for trustees to assist legislators with their re-election campaigns. This recommendation should be approached with

great caution; it is one thing as a representative of a sizeable constituency to offer a public forum for candidates. It is quite another for college leaders to publicly side with an incumbent who could lose the election to an opponent who might have been supportive of higher education had he/she not remembered that the trustees worked to defeat him/her. In short, the decision to campaign for an incumbent should be carefully evaluated, Grady's unqualified recommendation notwithstanding. In spite of these few shortcomings, most of Grady's suggestions offer a practical checklist of constructive activities for trustees to perform in developing one segment of a strong governmental relations program. But where can community college leaders find comprehensive advice on developing a legislative relations program? Two of the best sources are a study identifying strategies for legislative advocacy at Dallas County Community College (DCCC) in Texas (Caswell, 1988) and a case study of the legislative relations program at Miami-Dade Community College in Florida (Gomez, 1981). The DCCC study provides a good model for two crucial steps in developing an effective state government relations program:

1) identifying and coordinating a broad network of advocacy for the college

2) developing strategies to create effective relations between the community college and the legislature

Caswell presents much useful information, ranging from lists of state offices targeted for increased liaison to ranked fundraising suggestions and ideas for coordinating the

program. For example, one focus group participant suggested circulating an internal legislative newsletter tracking proposed legislation and lawmakers' positions on issues relevant to higher education. It is also worth noting that DCCC's plan was forged in the crucible of a crushing gubernatorial veto of increased funding in 1987. To its credit, the community college rallied to design the multifaceted, intensive program to improve governmental and public relations that is presented in this report. The study therefore serves as both a cautionary tale and a fine example of a creative response to a harsh blow. The same process detailed by Caswell could be used at most institutions to design a good program of legislative relations.

Finally, for a look at how effective a well-planned legislative relations program can be, the Miami-Dade Community College (MDCC) case study illustrates and analyzes the highly successful "Community College Grassroots Politics Program" set up by the Florida State Board for Community Colleges (1988). The report gives a step-by-step description of the MDCC program, beginning with the creation of a college-wide legislative committee with 10 specific tasks, such as establishing strong working relationships with community organizations and offering a one-day workshop each year for legislative aides. Hearings, workshops, reports of legislative activity--all the facets of a comprehensive effort are described. Equally important, the report does not limit itself to delineating only the program's successes;

instead, an analysis that resulted in a list of recommended improvements is included as well. Unfortunately, this list of needed improvements is sometimes vague. For instance, it calls for discouraging "special interest lobbying" but does not define the term or illustrate it with an example. Since no institution is likely to regard its own interests as questionable, it would have been wise to set out an example or two of what the public or lawmakers would be likely to regard as "special interest lobbying." Still, all seven recommended improvements are clear enough to serve as a starting point for discussion and development. Another facet of this report that enhances its value as a model is the series of appendices attached, such as the sample timetable for community college legislative committee work and the list of pointers on delivering effective testimony before legislators. The specificity of these appendices, along with the comprehensive nature of the program described, create a highly transportable program to emulate. Even better, this program has had time to show impressive results: After the statewide plan illustrated by MDCC went into effect in 1981, total funding for community colleges rose nearly 60 percent, from $297.1 million in 1982 to $498.5 million in 1988, according to a report published by the Florida State Board of Community Colleges (1988).

Examining the five sources reviewed above should give planners a clear idea of the steps necessary to develop effective legislative liaison. The stakes are high if campus

administrators fail to forge strong links between community colleges and state government, and the students who need community college programs and services will be the losers. On the other hand, developing a strong governmental relations program now could ensure stability for both students and administrators during an economic drought.

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